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ABSTRACT

"Lifewriting" provides a different model for the school composition class, a model that changes the traditional images of the student and teacher at work. Lifewriting--the composing of personal stories, anecdotes, and memoirs--has a beneficial effect in that while it begins with personal expression, the dynamics of the lifewriting group enable it also to become a means of communication, and finally an act of creation. In the composition classroom, students are a community of writers committed to helping and supporting each other, because their writing has a clearly understood sense of purpose. The teacher no longer is the evaluator of writing, but rather a community writer whose voice is simply one more opinion from the group. Also, the immediacy of group experience in reading each other's stories provides the student with a genuine audience, people who are interested in the experience that the writer has to communicate and prepared to offer advice when the written communication is garbled or when questions remain unanswered. This type of interaction and collaborative writing in a group is especially improved through use of the classroom microcomputer. Moreover, writing becomes an act of creation which produces "real writing," which may be worthy of preserving for other audiences of friends, grandchildren, family, or sometimes even the general readership of a lifewriting publication. Evaluation, however, is based on the student's commitment to the process, involvement in the collaborative structures, and knowledge of writing processes, rather than on dubious qualitative assessments of single pieces of writing. (KEH)

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WRITING AS A COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY

Lessons from the Lifewriting Class

by

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Since forming The Lifewriting Project some five years ago, they have presented lifewriting sessions for the Centre for Continuing Education and the Adult Education Department at UBC, and for various community groups and schools. In addition to their conference presentations and papers in professional journals, they have published *Lifewriting; Self-Exploration and Life Review Through Writing* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1988), *Writing Life Stories* (Vancouver: Centre for Continuing Education, 1988), and *Lifewriting; Visions and Reflections* (Vancouver: Center for Continuing Education, 1989).

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WRITING AS A COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY

JOIN THE REVOLUTION

English teachers, like the rest of humanity, but perhaps especially so, live their lives through symbols. It is appropriate, therefore, to consider two dominant images which seem to symbolize the traditional approach to the teaching of writing, because these images exert a symbolic power over our beliefs and practices. Until we become conscious of this power, we cannot truly see our way to making the changes which research studies suggest will provide better results. Perhaps David Hume (1739), in his *Treatise of Human Understanding* was right when he turned conventional wisdom upside down by writing: "Reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions."

So if English teachers are to join what Maxine Hairston (1982) called the "revolution in the teaching of writing," then it is not adequate to present research evidence or even describe Hairston's "new paradigm" in the teaching of writing as a set of methodological precepts in curriculum guides. Real change takes place only when the passions, as well as the mind, are engaged.

THE LONELY WRITER

The first image we see when we think of a writer struggling to express ideas has an eighteenth-century flavour. We see a lonely, impoverished, haggard figure in a dark and barren garret. lit only by a guttering candle or a

small, barred window. The scene, in fact, would not be very different if we placed our writer in solitary confinement in a gaol cell. The feeling conveyed in the scene is one of loneliness and despair. In its extreme form this symbolic figure becomes the image of romantic defeat in Henry Wallis' painting of "The Death of Chatterton." This image of the the writer at work (or rather, at death) reflects a common misconception of the writer's situation.

THE TEACHER'S CROSS

The companionpiece to this picture has yet to be painted, but it should present a scene which will be familiar to every English teacher. Now it is the end of the twentieth century, the surroundings will be more comfortable and the central figure need not be ragged and starving. But the feeling of loneliness and despair remains. We see an English teacher, late at night, engaged in what the public might consider as the quintessential duty of a teacher of composition: he or she is marking a set of students' papers, struggling to correct, edit, proofread, and grade their writing, with the hope that the effort will make them better writers. This teacher, although knowing that the hours of labour will have little effect on the students' writing skills, is driven to burn the midnight oil by having to placate the administration with a set of marks for the students which will recognize their academic worth.

The problem is that a harassed English teacher may have to deal with and write report cards for perhaps a hundred and fifty or two hundred students. Dr. Johnson might easily have been referring to this situation when he commented that "when a man knows that he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." Or the statement may be as easily applied to the students who have churned out their essays to meet the teacher's deadlines for having their work in on time. The writings which the harassed teacher struggles to correct and grade through the dark and lonely hours may themselves be the products of the students' own midnight oil.

Dr. Johnson, in fact, made this remark about the poor Rev. Dodd, who was to be hanged for forging a bond. The context was that Johnson had written a sermon for Dodd to present to his fellow prisoners in Newgate. Dodd had given the sermon as if it were his own work (the link here between forgery and plagiarism is close), but Dodd's friends suspected that Dodd could not have raised the power of his writing to such a degree. Johnson rose to Dodd's defense by suggesting that the circumstances made Dodd a better writer!

WRITING IN SCHOOLS

School-based writing, of course, seldom is such a life-or-death matter of importance, although many students may well feel that in submitting a paper for grading they are baring themselves for the teacher's judgment and execution.

Part of the problem is that writing is too often perceived as a test, whether as a means to demonstrate what a student has learned about a content field, or simply to show whether the student has mastered the conventions of writing. The other purposes of writing in schools, as attested by Farr and Daniels (1986)--writing to learn; writing to communicate; writing to express the self; writing to create--may very well overlap, or coalesce in a single act of writing, but too often, for too many students (and their teachers) they are submerged, shelved, or ignored because of the immediacy or valuing of the recordable mark or grade.

WRITING WITHOUT MARKING

The experience of teaching lifewriting with adult and senior citizen groups in continuing education and community centres provides a different model for the school composition class--a model that can be replicated in schools if we are able to change our traditional images of the student and teacher at work. We have found that this shift in the mode of teaching frees the

student-writer from the loneliness of the literary garret and liberates the teacher from the dreadful task of marking papers by the light of the midnight oil.

First, lifewriting--the composing of personal stories, anecdotes, and memoirs, as described in our text *Lifewriting: Self-exploration and Life Review Through Writing* (Bentley, Butler, 1988)--has a beneficial effect in that while it begins with personal expression, the dynamics of the lifewriting group enable it also to become a means of communication, and finally an act of creation. Secondly, the lifewriting group becomes a community of writers committed to helping and supporting each other, because their writing has a clearly-understood sense of purpose. The writing becomes "real writing" because it is based on the truth of the writers' experiences. Moreover, the process of writing allows their life stories to become an act of creation, very often a literary artefact, which may be worthy of preserving for other audiences of friends, grandchildren, family, or sometimes even the general readership of a lifewriting publication.

Our experience with a variety of groups shows in the lifewriting group, we get, almost immediately, without forcing, what many teachers see as "real writing." Moreover, the immediacy of the group experience in the reading of each other's stories provides the writer with a genuine audience, people who are interested in the experience that the writer has to communicate, and prepared to offer advice when the written communication is garbled, or when questions remain unanswered.

"REAL" WRITING

Here is a fragment of a conversation by Sir Nevill Cardus who seems to fit this conception of the "real" writer:

> I've never consciously written for a public or even for an editor. I write for my own enjoyment and self-enlightenment. A writer has to struggle with himself; you write to satisfy the critic who stares at you from the back of your mind.

The quotation, which at first seems eminently satisfying and quite readily acceptable, does, however, raise a number of interesting questions.

First, is this the sort of writer we as teachers want to produce? Second, if this is an ideal, are our current practices directed to achievement of this idea, or are they more neatly grouped around such communication concerns as effectiveness, appropriateness, correctness?

The central problem, perhaps, is that we ourselves often--outside a testing situation--are not clear what vision we have of the writing process. Indeed, it may be that we do not even share a common vision with our colleagues although we all take it for granted quite erroneously that we all know what we want. Frequently, for instance, we speak of writing as *discovery*, and we have many reports of professional writers attesting that composing is more a process of coming to understand rather than putting words to paper (Murray 1984). This would be the self-enlightenment that Cardus speaks of. Yet our traditional instructional practices seems to stress the polishing and editing skills as separate rather than endemic processes.

But the matter of vision goes even deeper. Cardus, the image of the single-minded "genius" writing for art's sake and not for any vulgar populace, is another, perhaps more gentlemanly, version of the stereotype of the writer as the solitary and self-sufficient hermit.

It is strange that we still hold this vision of the solitary writer when increasingly our classroom approaches incorporate such collaborative activities as writing groups, group editing, conferencing, peer tutoring, and other ideas for promoting the sharing of writing. It is as if we believe that these practices are all motivatory, idea-generating, instrumental processes that are preliminary to ultimately the solo-writing experience. Similarly, group practices applied to the surface part of the process--group comment, editing and proofreading--also tend to mark out the product as individually and separately created.

The difficulty with this otherwise quite admirable program of writing activities is that the available energy of the communal approach is barely being tapped. Nancy Sommers (1980), for instance, has noted that when revising, skilled writers are trying to understand their own ideas, while unskilled writers tinker with surface correctness. And it is with what skilled writers do that we should be concerned. The response, in other words, is to help writers discover what they mean rather than to eradicate surface mistakes. Faye Peltzman (1981) found the effectiveness of this in working with college students who became skilled in the task when they began to formulate activities and assignments in their own terms. Writers can do this against a background of response that is not limited to the usual three-header of **response-writing-response,** leading to correction and grading. Indeed, there is evidence that if these strategies are used only for grading purposes they may be unproductive (Sommers 1982). Perhaps the purpose for these procedures although logical, explainable, and eminently sensible when focussed on finding a topic, decorating it and polishing it, is not sufficient or truly appropriate for the writing itself.

CREATING THROUGH WRITING

Language is a dynamic event. Creating though language can be exciting and impelling for the writer. Writing then becomes purposeful--but *really* purposeful and enriching in the process of self-enlightenment and self-discovery. Suddenly the purpose of exploring the meaning and quality of one's life becomes the driving force, rather than being of merely limited purpose in coming up with a product to satisfy the teacher.

The excitement is with the generating of ideas, the exposure of a capacity to create, the uncovering of a way to mine thought and feelings that one was not even aware existed within oneself. This is why the conference is so valuable--at its best it provides a forum for discussing the magic of ideas and their re-channeling back to the writer.

So what we need to do is to develop this arousal in the classroom. We need to study how we organize our environment and how our students react. Florio and Clark (1982) provide an analytic grid for examining the social dimensions of classroom writing activities, but really the first taste is to be found in a feeling, a vision on the teacher's part of what works (see Regoff and Love, 1982).

GROUP PRACTICE IN WRITING

There are clues to how we might proceed from the processes and practices that have been show to work in the teaching of lifewriting courses.

The basic lessons for our school programs might be to design specific activities and assignments that:

1. Will be built on purposeful writing -- to understand a problem, to capture a memory, to ease a pain, to explore a meaning, to settle old scores, ease a pain, trap a meaning, etc.

2. Will depend of the discovery within oneself of answers.

3. Will promote sharing--not for correcting--but as a means of explaining the quest.

4. Will result in the making of a written artefact, perhaps a publication, for oneself, or for those who are genuinely interested in the messages that have been communicated.

5. Evaluation of academic success will be based on the student's commitment to the process, involvement in the collaborative structures, and knowledge of writing processes, rather than on dubious qualitive assessments of single pieces of writing.

BEYOND COOPERATION TO COLLABORATION

The group processes which provide support and encouragement for the struggling writer are now quite familiar to the modern teacher. In most classrooms from Grade 1 onwards we see small groups of students meeting around a table or on the carpet in the corner of a classroom for

the sharing of stories. When the teacher is present in the group he or she acts as a leader among equals. The teacher will also be a writer and sharer of writing. And the teacher's voice in response to a student's reading is simply one more opinion from the group, not the final judgment of the "expert" critic.

Nor is the sharing of stories confined only to the presentation of finished pieces. In the modern classroom we can expect to see a great deal of conferencing--between student and student as well as between student and teacher, or among groups of three or more students. In this type of conferencing a student might simply be exploring orally some ideas for writing. Conferencing can be a form of the writer's rehearsal of ideas in preparation for writing. Donald Murray (1979) makes a point of the many forms of jotting and note-taking, journal writing or brainstorming by which an idea evolves in the writer's head: "Sometimes the writer not only talks to himself or herself, but to others--collaborators, editors, teachers, friends--working out the idea for a piece of writing in oral language with someone else who can enter into the process of discovery with the writer."

We have found in lifewriting groups at all age-levels the importance of "telling" writing, when the writer can talk about an idea while it is still in the germinating stage. The reciprocal of this process is that the conferencer, through questions and suggestions, is able to help writers to shape, clarify and extend their ideas. Wixon and Stone (1977) formalized this process for the secondary school by adapting a "talk-write" technique, based on the ideas of Robert Zoellner (1969), who developed what he termed a "Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition." Wixon and Stone's method makes writing a public affair by having the students work in a partnership, with the writer using a felt pen and large sheets of butcher paper to make a first draft, while the "encouraging half" of the team reads, comments, and questions the writing while it is literally in the process of being written in full view.

WRITING WITH A MICROCOMPUTER

Now, through the increasing ubiquity of the microcomputer, technology lets us take cooperation in writing a stage farther. In the Wixon and Stone model the writer still retains "ownership" of the writing. The writer controls the process and assumes responsibility for the finished draft. But if we put two students together at the keyboard of a microcomputer loaded with a word-processing program, the result can become a true collaborative model of writing. Given a common assignment the students will adopt roles according to their abilities. One will become the keyboarder who actually translates their words into the machine, while the other will be the reader of the text and proof-reader, while still contributing to the ideas and making suggestions for the next sentence. And of course these roles may be reversed at any time as they work together to generate a common text.

In one such study by Butler and Cox (1990) two grade one students were given only a modicum of instruction before being let loose to compose a story on a classroom microcomputer. The texts which they produced may not seem particularly remarkable as examples of grade one composition. But the teacher, with the students' permission, made tape-recordings of their talk while they composed, and it is their oral language which reveals the degree of collaboration between the two as they jointly composed their stories.

At the other end of the educational spectrum, teachers and education students, as part of a university course in the use of microcomputers for language development, were taught the basics of a word-processing program, and then asked to compose a joint text directly onto the screen in response to their reading of an educational text. The participants worked in pairs and adopted the same sort of role-sharing strategies as the grade one students. But in this case the variety of their joint composing processes in the generation of their texts reveals the potential for this type of collaborative writing.

Some of the partnerships, sticking to the more traditional method for formal academic writing, began by making a topic outline of their ideas before starting their written discourse. Others jumped right into their text and let their ideas flow from one sentence to the next. In some cases the students took turns, sentence by sentence, to compose and keyboard their ideas, one student's sentence adding to the idea already generated by the partner. An interesting variation is the method used by two of the partnerships whereby their texts became a written dialogue between the two writers. One student would keyboard a statement onto the screen to which the partner would add a rider or extension. In one case, the students actually changed positions at the keyboard and each student took a turn to type in the next contribution. In these cases the finished text read like the dialogue of play.

Students at both the grade one and university levels were very enthusiastic about this method of composing, mainly because the shared responsibility for the final text reduced their anxiety about writing. An important feature of this process was the amount of reading that fed into the process. Teachers of remedial classes know that it is very difficult to get weak writers to read their text accurately, to achieve coherence through building each idea onto the previous one. When two students are engaged in joint authoring on a microcomputer the amount of text-reading jumps dramatically, because each student must read and understand the other's statement before adding to the text. With the grade one students the tape-recordings showed that there was also a lot of *joint-reading* as the students, quite spontaneously, read in unison, chanted, or even sang out their completed piece of text.

GROUP AUTHORSHIP

The concept of joint authorship has been taken a stage further by Juliana Yanushefski (1988) in a secondary school where she was charged with teaching several remedial language arts

classes for students who were having difficulty with reading and writing. Yanushefski rejected the traditional "reductionist" or "bottom-up" type of skills approach which would have had the students doing drills and exercises. Instead, she developed a "constructivist" or "top-down" approach in the belief that students would learn to read and write if she had them reading and writing in a real communicative situation.

In order to create a literacy environment she required each of her groups to read the play by Paul Zindel, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, and then to use the insights gained from their discussions of the literary experience to act, compose, rehearse, and stage plays of their own. The students had to choose from such themes as drug abuse, family problems, and racial prejudice, etc., and then through improvised drama create situations which could be developed into a plot. Throughout the project the students alternated between talking and writing, acting and revising, in the process of group authorship which eventually produced a script for their stage productions.

CONCLUSION: NEW IMAGES OF THE WRITER AT WORK

The success of group or joint authorship goes well beyond the production of an acceptable text. This mode of collaborative writing is especially beneficial for the reluctant or "basic" writer who rarely ever feels the joy of creating a worthy product. But even more important is the learning that takes place when students cooperate with each other and the weaker students benefits from the modelling of the competent writer. Simply to participate in writing processes which are aimed at the creation of real texts with real communication for real audiences is an important lesson for students whose writing ambition has never before risen above the level of trying to produce a page without spelling and punctuation errors.

In our lifewriting groups we have witnessed the development of writing abilities that happens when even beginning writers become involved or committed to the writing process. In the beginning it is the emphasis on the expression of personal experience which provides the initial thrust. But it the support and encouragement of the group which sustains the writer's momentum.

What, then, are the images that truly reflect modern approaches to the teaching of written composition? First, we can see two students sitting side by side; both of them are adding words and phrases to a single sheet of paper as they talk about their ideas for the topic. Or we can see the same pair of students sitting before the keyboard of a microcomputer which they are using to generate ideas and create a text through addition, deletion, substitution, and other forms of structural revision, as well as addressing the surface concerns of proofreading. Their activity is a mix of talking, keyboarding, reading, and composing.

In another situation we can see a group of students, possibly with a teacher among them, seated around a table. They are discussing the ideas which may eventually become a written or printed text, or sharing a text which some of them have begun to compose.

These images represent the collaborative approach to forms of joint authorship by which students benefit from the help from their peers and teachers which this type of informal structure makes available in the classroom.

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